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GUEST OPINION

Bill would help people get their homes back

Ruth Johnson is Oakland County Clerk/ Register of Deeds.

The worst of times isn't bringing out the best in some people. Here in Oakland County, some unscrupulous investors and overwhelmed financial institutions are, in effect, "stealing" the last chance some families have to save their foreclosed homes.

The problem is this: Most homeowners who lose their homes to foreclosure have six months — even after the home has been sold at sheriff's sale — to redeem their home. All they need is the money and the amount they need to pay.

In March 2005, however, well-intentioned state lawmakers changed real estate law to prohibit Michigan's county registers from calculating the amount of money necessary to redeem a home that has gone through foreclosure — a simple calculation registers had provided for years as a public service.

The change in law had unforeseen consequences. It gave the responsibility of calculating the redemption amount to the investor who had purchased the home — the people with a very real financial stake in keeping the newly purchased home.

We have had complaints from original homeowners who say it is nearly impossible to find out the amount needed to save their homes. Phones are disconnected. Telephone calls reportedly aren't returned. Some have been forced to hire attorneys to force companies or investors to release what is very basic information.

Worse yet, some of these institutions are charging more than \$200 to provide the redemption amount, which literally takes just minutes to calculate — and this to families already in financial crisis.

Our office, working with Macomb County Clerk/Register Carmella Sabaugh in a bipartisan effort, has pushed for legislation that would restore our ability to provide redemption amounts as a neutral government agency with no financial stake in the outcome — known as Senate Bill 1390.

We believe we can provide that same calculation for \$50 or less, just to cover our expenses.

We have run into opposition — lobbyists are working very hard against this consumer protection bill.

Senate Bill 1390 would not mandate that other county registers get back into the business of providing calculations, just allow those of us who want to provide that service to do so.

The legislation, sponsored by Sen. Nancy Cassis, (RNovi), was approved by the Michigan Senate Banking Committee last week and now goes to the Senate for consideration. If it isn't taken up and passed by both the Senate and the House of Representatives by the end of the year, the bill dies.

Times are tough, but common decency shouldn't be. It's important to act quickly — more than 9,000 people in Oakland County alone have lost their homes to foreclosure since the bill was introduced on Jan. 4, 2008.

We aren't asking for a bail-out or a tax credit — just the ability to perform a simple calculation that will help families save their homes. I would urge you to contact your local senator to urge support for Senate Bill 1390.



RUTH JOHNSON